

AN INTIMATE VACUUM: Ernie Kovacs in the Aura of Video

By John Minkowsky

It has, of late, become commonplace to cite the quirky, cerebral broadcast comedy of Ernie Kovacs as prophetic of video art, a form of alternative TV which was all but nonexistent at the time of Kovacs' death in 1962. Ernie has been included in a number of major exhibitions and published chronologies tracking the rise of the independent video movement, but his fertile, versatile imagination penetrates even where art world acknowledgement is wanting. The first three entries of one standard resource, "A Video Chronology, 1959 – 1974," are exemplary:

1959 - "Partitur TV De-Collage" and "Ereignisse fur Millionen" (a happening). Wolf Vostell's early piece.

1963 - "Electronic TV," Nam June Paik. Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal. A thirteen-monitor installation, with distorted broadcast images.

1964 - *Jazz Images*, produced by Fred Barzyk. WGBH-TV, Boston. One of the earliest experimental programs made at WGBH.¹

Wolf Vostell's "TV De-Collage" was a gallery exhibition of treated TV sets, some of them badly mistuned and misaligned, others spattered with paint, violently battered or riddled with bullet holes. The exhibition was a full-frontal assault, reflecting the frustration of artists denied the means of creative expression in the TV medium, against both the icon of the television set itself and the broadcast pictures and sounds it was designed to reproduce. In 1963, Vostell suggested that the otherwise passive TV viewer could actually gain a measure of control over the viewing situation by watching broadcast fare through barbed wire constructions, pictures and photos pasted on the television, or remnants of a hurled cream pie dripping down the screen. In the best of all possible worlds, the TV screen against which Vostell's participatory viewer tossed pastries might well have been displaying a kinescope of Kovacs, circa 1951, as he lobbed pies against a sheet of glass placed between himself and the camera ...just to see if his early morning Philadelphia audience was paying attention

The symbolic attempt to break through the television screen, which most palpably separates the few performers/transmitters from the many viewers/receivers, unites the anarchic slapstick gestures of Vostell and Kovacs. It was a crude but endearing whack at achieving one-on-one intimacy, the latent essence of the television experience.

Nam June Paik, video art's paterfamilias and as protean and formidable a figure as Kovacs, initiated a more beneficent interaction between the broadcaster and receiver in his "Electronic TV" exhibition. Like Vostell, Paik installed thirteen altered TV sets in a gallery situation; Paik, however, had rewired each television so that off-the-air broadcast

imagery could be manipulated by gallery visitors via knobs, magnets, microphones, and other devices. Sitcoms, talk shows, political speeches, or whatever it was that occupied the ionosphere at the time could be displayed in negative or with artificial color added, reversed left to right or top to bottom, or rotated in a spiral around a central axis. Paik's (mal)adjustable sets were part of a contemporary tradition in which "found" – or mass-produced – images, sounds, and objects are recontextualized and/or transfigured into objets d'art.

There are striking parallels, both superficial and profound, between the work of radio/TV performer Kovacs and composer/visual artist Paik, despite the radically different natures of their chosen milieus. As a primary exponent in the 1960s of Fluxus – an anti-convention, anti-high-culture art derived from the European Dadaists of the 1920s – Paik composed musical pieces such as *One for Solo Violin* (1962) in which the performer is instructed to smash a violin to bits (and this, notably, long before such actions became obligatory among rock-and-roll rebels). As a TV comedian, Kovacs was more iconoclastic than any of his peers, and his infamous blackout wherein a Stradivarius is brutally stomped on also undermines artistic preciousness and makes an aesthetic strategy of surprise. (Kovacs' grandest gesture, however, would be directed against an instrument of TV itself; one day, as a delightful and expensive experiment, he tossed a lighted match at a TV camera, thereby permanently damaging its light-sensitive Orthicon tube.) For both Paik and Kovacs, attempts at cleansing the eyes, ears, and conceptual palates of the audience were not limited to destructive gestures; both made ingenious use of any and all available video techniques, and then went on to invent a few that were not yet within the broadcast vocabulary.

One suspects that Kovacs would have been intrigued by Paik's exhibition of transformed TVs, and even moreso by the Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer, a semi-portable, hand-built TV effects board...and then some. But Kovacs would undoubtedly been amused by WGBH's premiere broadcast of video artistry. *Jazz Images* opens with a bit of musical doggerel every bit as insipid as the Nairobi Trio's anthem, "Solfeggio," accompanied by visuals created by attaching a kaleidoscope to the TV camera. As can be imagined, symmetrical patterns of light and dark pulse and fluctuate in time to the musical score.

Kovacs had employed a makeshift kaleidoscopic device to similar ends during his first couple of years at WPTZ in Philadelphia; turning the lens in time to a piece of pre-recorded music proved a simple but engaging way to fill a few minutes of the dozens or more weekly hours Kovacs was on the air. In one of his 1961 specials, he used the technique again, with the movement of a finger and patterned backgrounds set to a composition by Deems Taylor. The resultant piece provisioned countless hours of abstract video art, from primitive feedback tapes to computer-synthesized footage, a good deal of which it still surpasses in quality.

KOVACS, THE INDIGENOUS TELEVISUALIST

Ernie Kovacs was an anomalous protoplast whose relationship to subsequent developments in broadcast comedy, no less video art, is complex. Kovacs' near-

apotheosis over the past two decades, coupled with the limited availability of extant kinescopes and videotapes of his work, has only further served to cloud the issue regarding the true nature of his influence.

The history of video is not a mere footnote to chronicles of broadcast TV, despite the fact that independent video was, as Hollis Frampton noted, born from the “the Jovian backside (I dare not say brow) of that Other Thing called television.”² Technological, economic, sociopolitical, and aesthetic circumstances of the late 1960s encouraged artists to explore the most powerful and pervasive mass medium in history, and in so doing to challenge the homogenized programming that has been, despite occasional luminous moments, its mainstay. In their contrariness and commitment to the unique possibilities of electronic visualization, video artists have consistently attempted to redefine the form, technique, and tempo of TV, the relationship of maker to viewer, and the very nature of televised information.

Given the environment of 1950s broadcasting, Kovacs was the sole perpetrator of anything we can reasonably refer to, in retrospect, as video artistry. Moreover, a strong case can be made for Kovacs as the preeminent auteur in broadcast history. By all accounts, he wrote, visualized, and directed each and every hour of airtime he was granted as a performer. In the process, he developed a complex of signature visual styles, thematic motifs, and unique formats that remained consistent no matter the network, time of day, or alleged program genre (and he ran the gamut, from DuMont to NBC to CBS to ABC, from early morning to late night, from cooking to quiz to talk to a Kovacsian free-form shows).

The Kovacs oeuvre is multi-form and therefore difficult to pigeonhole. He was capable of both broad physical humor and exquisitely subtle sight gags, and could proffer a crusty chestnut pie in the face even while en route to realms where natural laws, such as gravity, could be transcended through sublime electronic magic. Early kinescopes prove Kovacs a masterful explorer of the “theater of poverty” – lifting a phrase used by critic David Antin to describe the video artist’s innate ability to overcome techno-economic limitations with just a modicum of imagination and a handful of fresh ideas. But Kovacs is also infamous for later extravagances, both personal and professional, his visions of life and art incorruptible by concerns for the bottom line. Many of the sight gags of his last ABC specials are small masterpieces in the manner of *Eugene* (a/k/a *The Silent Show*, 1957), Kovacs’ grand opus and the basis for much of his reputation in video and performance art circles. Yet Ernie’s abilities with language were formidable, and he was as brilliant a pidgin polyglot as Sid Caesar and equal of any verbal improviser of the time, from Lenny Bruce to Jonathan Winters.

Kovacs is often best remembered as a parodist of television’s quiz programs (“Where Do You Worka, John?,” “Whom Dunnit?,” and that travesty disguised as a real game show, “Take a Good Look”); its commercials (for a “simulated plastic safety razor with the built-in pituitary gland,” among countless others); its pseudodocumentary formats (E.K. as a chain-smoking Edward B. Furrow on *Back to Back* ... “this program is not filmed nor is it live”); and even its cultural programming (an Italian TV broadcast, on the new

ENNA-B-C network, of a ludicrous, self-destructing operetta). But Kovacs almost as frequently referred to the visual arts, poetry, and, of course, orchestral music. Regarding the latter, his visual interpretations of music classics are eccentric, personal, and, by turns, lovely and funny.

The paintings in Kovacsian tableaux invariably come to life, break through the confinements of their frames, or otherwise intrude upon the ostensible “reality” that surrounds them. It is a fitting metaphor for Kovacs’ frequent attempts to crack open the TV screen with his video illusions. A painted skier descends a slope and is propelled straight through the edge of the frame; Mona Lisa’s audible giggles prompt a rapid pan to the floor, where a cat rubs against an extended human leg; a quick sketch of a cannon blasts a real vase off an adjacent table; and a moosehead on the wall (seemingly scavenged from an old Tex Avery cartoon) is discovered to be the mere tip of the mooseberg, standing with tail awag in the next room. Artworks most often corrupt the frame, but they may also, like the bulk of Kovacs’ visual humor, disturb our expectations regarding shared perceptions of reality. In a devastating parody of Grandma Moses *and* modern art, Ernie visits Mother Rustic, a farmer who, between cow-milking and pig-slaughtering, finds time to “paint what’s familiar.” Her canvases are abstract arrangements of geometric forms bearing such titles as “Old Silo,” “Newborn Calf,” and “Sheepdog and Wolf”; one entitled “When Day is Done” is, after the manner of Ad Reinhardt, nothing more nor less than a black canvas.

Satiric references to modern painting have, of course, no more to do with video art *per se* than do the televised dramas, symphonies, and gallery tours that make up the bulk of “cultural programming” on broadcast TV. What links Kovacs to the subsequent practitioners of video art are his inexhaustible experimental spirit and his pioneering efforts to develop what Teddy Dibble – a young videomaker also working in idiosyncratic comedic forms – calls indigenous television.

Indigenous television refers to the original approaches, techniques, styles, and formats that arise as a direct result of employing the medium in a creative capacity rather than simply as an efficient means of faithfully transmitting variations on standard theatrical/cinema/radio fare. It is in some ways startling, after nearly forty years of glutted airwaves, to contemplate how very few moments of even the best TV could be said to reflect much of the medium’s innate, authentic potentiality.

Kovacs excepted, the concept of indigenous television was born along with video art in 1965, the year SONY offered educational markets the first inexpensive, lightweight portable black-and-white videotape system. The Portapak, a primitive, nonprofessional (ergo personal) recording unit, nevertheless had a revolutionary impact: finally, video production was accorded an identity distinct from the economic tyranny of television transmission. Freed of the costly constraints of studio time, and of schedule pressures and programming biases, artists undertook to reinvent the medium to their own radical, joyful ends. It was passionate play in the spirit, if not always the manner, of Kovacs, and it yielded a plenitude of insights into what television was and shouldn’t be, and hadn’t been and could be.

Ernie Kovacs is much admired by video artists of all persuasions for his original use of the medium. Yet few video artists – perhaps because of the general scarcity of Kovacs on tape or in rerun – have felt the direct influence of his extraordinary vision upon their own work. Kovacs, therefore, seems more appropriately characterized as a “non-linear precursor” of video art – to borrow from Jim Pomeroy’s description of the work of Spike Jones and its striking parallel to current trends in avant-garde music and performance art.³ As non-linear precursor, Kovacs intuited a good many of the key issues that would engage practitioners of video art and, notwithstanding his obvious conceptual skills, did so unencumbered by the excess baggage of theory. Like many video artists (who are later rather cavalierly lumped together as “electronic imagists”), Kovacs made innovative use of all available studio effects and then developed new electro-optical techniques to expand the medium’s visual vocabulary. He appropriated and critiqued the clichés of broadcast TV in gentle parody (like video artists *and* other television comedians) but was also capable of more trenchant attacks, laced with black humor, that were radical for their time. And like many video artists, he consistently undermined mainline television through reflexive humor, an intimate style, a distinctive sense of time, and the development of new broadcast formats – most notably the comic blackout and the music video.

Needless to say (because it has been said by everyone else already), Kovacs was an inspired televisionary, a genius who made most of his contemporaries on the tube look a bit more like boobs than they probably deserved.

ERNIE IN VIDEOSPACE

Video art’s electronic imagists have, for the most part, shared in the belief that the pictures and sounds presented on and through video monitors should somehow reflect the medium’s unique characteristics. Many have explored electronic abstraction (video feedback, analog signal processing, digital image generation) as a means of personal expression. The works of others reflect a more objective mode of inquiry into the nature and organization of the materials of which the medium is, in essence, comprised – the electron, the waveform, the raster, the field, the frame. In either case, these artists generally employ a combination of conventional TV equipment, self-designed video tools, computer systems, and other specialized hardware and software.

The electronic imagists have attempted to extent standard TV studio technology beyond customary usage. A prime example: The keyer was designed as a convenient means of inserting documentary footage and graphics behind the newscast desk, but it could also allow Steina and Woody Vasulka, in an homage to surrealist painter René Magritte, to float a loaf of bread over electronic landscapes (*Golden Voyage*, 1973); or Merce Cunningham, a seminal figure of modern choreography, to dance atop water or with multilayered images of himself (*Blue Studio*, 1978); or David Cort to create a living menagerie of bizarre humans with enlarged eyeballs and lips for heads, arms for legs, legs for noses, etc. (The Interactive Videospace Environments series, 1976).

Apropos Kovacs, he hosted his last specials from the control booth of the TV studio. With very few exceptions, Kovacs never shot on location; the studio was his home (as is often literally the case with video artists) because it could most easily accommodate his unusual visions, comic or otherwise. By the end of his career, Kovacs was becoming more of a performer at the video console than on the sound stage, a new type of TV director who eschewed the simple transmission of events in a theatrical manner in favor of synthetic events possible only in a videospace mix.

The terms “videospace” and “videospace mix” originated with Brice Howard, a visionary ex-broadcaster who created the first working environment dedicated to the exploration of television as a fine arts medium.⁴ The concept of videospace is that of an electronic canvas in motion, a two-dimensional surface that *presents* indigenous graphic visions rather than *represents*, like a window on deep theatrical space, simulations of other art forms. The videospace mix is the means of achieving artificial realities existent solely upon the inner surface of the picture tube using all manner of common and uncommon electronic special effects - from superimposition and chroma key to scan modulation, raster manipulation, and beyond. Clearly, the videospace mix has been an anathema to commercial TV, except perhaps in comedy and, lately, music videos – terrains that bear the unmistakable, ash-laden spoor of Kovacs’ passage.

In introducing a 1961 special amid the empty theater seats of a broadcast studio, Kovacs made very clear that what was forthcoming was *not* more televised vaudeville but, rather, a new kind of electronic theater that was possible only in videospace. The image of a miniaturized woman keyed onto Kovacs’ shoulder underscored the point, even as the “Hungarian Alistair Cooke” informed us that there would be no live audience (because, in fact, there couldn’t be) nor even any canned laughter. The environment in which these events would transpire was, he added, “an intimate vacuum.”

Kovacs’ videospace sight gags abound with ordinary studio effects employed in a singular manner; the joke is in the mix. There are the classic uses of superimposition (Ernie trapped in a bottle that’s filling with water); of the reversed polarity switch (man enters darkroom, exits in negative); of videotape editing back in the days when it was still a laborious cut-and-paste job (Percy Dovetonsils on a swing back-and-forth in and out of the frame, and back-and-forth, and back-and-forth, and forth?!); and of the most primitive but also the purest electronic image (the oscilloscope waveform, pulsing to the strains of Kurt Weill, that accompanies the blackout segments). Kovacs’ masterful uses of keying are myriad: The inner thoughts of the villain, heroine, and hero of a silent melodrama are revealed on their foreheads; a boy posing for a sketch is decapitated by the artist’s erasures; Ernie’s and Edie’s heads appear live atop animated cartoon bodies. And in the world of *Eugene*, of course, invisible vacuum cleaners and TV sets perform admirably, with the aid of electronic keying.

As videospace illusionist, Kovacs proved before anyone else that the electronic whole is greater than the sum of its optically derived parts. But his late work, built of mixed signals, odd formats, and other ambiguities, must have seemed heterodox to a broadcast

industry largely striving for the clear transmission of familiar, prefab entertainment packages.

Nam June Paik, another master of videospace, time, and illusion, said in a 1973 interview:

“...Everything has been to date designed for TV in high fidelity, for clear, representational pictures. Now for the first time Mr. Abe [Shuya Abe, Paik’s early technical collaborator] is purposely designing a low-fidelity amplifier ... There is a parallel between art history and TV. From Giotto to Ingres there is a steady search for more perfection in high fidelity. Then Monet made it low fidelity. TV has been searching for high fidelity too. The whole electronics industry has had but one purpose to serve: reproduction of the original signal. They never question the signal ... The nature of the source is not their problem ... Mr. Abe says, everything in TV is now set for high fidelity, but there is nothing to do. Therefore, now is the time in TV for low fidelity. Hi-fi is dead in music with Stockhausen and Cage, dead in marriage with Dr. Kinsey, and dead in TV with us.”⁵

Paik was speaking on the subject of his prototypical Video Synthesizer, a machine which shrunk the TV control panel to keyboard size, and then added new effects such as the synthetic colorization of monochrome pictures and various types of image distortion. The obvious outgrowth of his first altered TV sets, Paik’s synthesizer is exemplary of the preliminary work in equipment, or tool, design and construction that many video artists have deemed essential to the redefinition of TV as a creative medium. The first generation of electronic imagists is an odd assortment of scientists and technologists turned artists (such as Dan Sandin, Stephen Beck, Eric Siegel, Ken Knowlton) and of image/sound artists engaged in conceptual design, if not actual construction, of new machines (Paik, the Vasulkas, Bill Etra).

Kovacs was himself something of an inventor of lo-fi electro-optical instruments capable of unusual video effects. His TV kaleidoscope has already been mentioned, but he also used mirrors to split and invert the image (in order to conduct dialogues with himself, or to sweep the studio ceiling), Sterno cans to create crude video dissolves and, it would seem, even some electronic image processing to make the screen pulsate on command. These are minor, but unprecedented, inventions, and they serve as further proof of Kovacs’ fundamental desire to incorporate new forms of visual synthesis achieved in videospace into normative modes of hi-fi TV production.

INTIMATE SPACE AT AN UNCOMMON PACE, AND OTHER THINGS

Kovacs’ prescience regarding the electronic image and videospace is matched only by his profound understanding of the black box of the TV set, its formal properties and social proprieties, and the manner in which “information” is conveyed to and perceived by the viewing public.

More so than any of his contemporaries, Kovacs realized that TV was *an intimate medium*. The television screen was small, monochrome, and of inferior resolution; thus while the movies, responding to the economic threat of TV, touted the panoramic full-color landscapes of Cinemascope, TV was discovering the human facescape, in closeup and rendered to virtual scale, as its most effective visual image. Mere talking heads are one thing, but Kovacs' physiognomic gymnastics were quite another. On a 1956 NBC morning show, he staged a stunning comedic snippet by flexing his nostrils, raising his eyebrows, wiggling his ears and puffing out smoke in syncopated time to a musical number. And Kovacs' framing of his head with a TV screen, circa 1951, in order to illustrate the use of the vertical and horizontal control knobs remains television's choicest bit of reflexive humor.

Video art has spawned numerous visual humorists – heirs to a variety of Kovacsian strategies, walking a fine line between accessible and puzzling comedy, between funny and strange. Chief among these are William Wegman, best-known for a series of extraordinary videotapes and photographs featuring Man Ray, his Weimaraner; and Mitchell Kriegman, who skillfully works in both art world and commercial contexts. Kriegman acknowledges a direct debt to Kovacs, whereas Wegman is an admirer after the fact, having found his initial inspiration in things “dumber and slower, like TV ads by Southern California used-car salesmen.”⁶ Both artists, however, developed intimate styles combining low-key delivery, the confessional form, and direct address to the audience, and improvisation using common objects as storytelling devices, their own bodies – in close-up and eccentrically framed – as visual/sonic performance instruments (e.g., Wegman's “Singing Torso” and Kriegman's “Dancing Bellybutton”).

TV is intimate not only because its picture is small and indistinct, but also because it is commonly experienced in virtual solitude and in the privacy of the home, where public formality gives way to relaxed activity and occasional indiscretion. “Thank you for inviting me into your home” was the cliché sign-off of Red Skelton and others, to which Kovacs once added, “But couldn't you have cleaned it up a little?” With typical offhandedness, Kovacs signaled a new relationship between the performer and his or her audience that had less to do with impersonal theatrics (ingratiatingly addressing “You,” the generic viewer) than it did with informal conversation (as in “you ... yes, I mean you ... the guy with the messy living room”). He also undercut the trite mannerisms that pass for good broadcast manners: TV is, as often as not, an impolite intruder that infuriates as much as it entertains. In a Kovacs sketch, a frustrated viewer drills through the top of the set and into the picture, sinking an obnoxious pair of singers in a canoe. Years later, art critic Douglas Davis would tape the back side of a glowing TV set, Nam June Paik would instruct viewers of public TV to turn off their sets, and in a performance called *Media Burn*, a group of artists collectively known as Ant Farm would drive a customized Cadillac through a bank of blazing monitors at San Francisco's Cow Palace.

Perhaps one reason why Kovacs could so glibly mock the spurious courtesies of other broadcast personalities was that, with each program, the audience was also, in a sense, entering Kovacs' home – the TV studio. In the early days, Kovacs all but slept in the

studio (he slept very little, it is said) and the camaraderie in evidence among crew, staff, and cast had a familial air, with the relaxed persona of Ernie always at center.

Intimacy implies interaction, but it took artists working in small-format video to reinvolve the medium's inherent potential for two-way interactivity – *true communication* – that commercial interests had effectively designed out of the broadcast system from its very inception. Kovacs' gallery of "snepshots" (photos of the show taken by viewers off the home screen) was a far cry from interactive electronic sculptures and installations (by the likes of Peter Campus, Wendy Clarke, and Gary Hill) and more recent explorations by artists of interactive videodisc (Lynn Hershman, Grahame Weinbren, Barbara Buckner, Bill Viola, and others) and of two-way cable (Jaime Davidovich) and satellite (Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz). But it was a start, and clearly ahead of its time.

Artists as diverse as Vito Acconci, Douglas Davis, Lisa Steele, and Teddy Dibble (whose perceptions regarding Kovacs' significance cut deeper than most), have all understood that the intimacy of video also implies shared secrets and occasional forays into taboo territory. There is, in Kovacs' TV work, a dark strain of humor involving death and mutilation that was outré for its time. In the mid-1970s, however, black comedy underwent a renaissance of sorts in the work of video artists such as Kriegman, Tony Oursler, Alan Lande, Willie Walker, and the members of Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, as well as in the sporadic sitcom and the latenight brutalities of Michael O'Donoghue and others on mainstream TV.

Kovacs' greatest "contribution" to video art may well have been his manipulation, and disregard, for the conventions of broadcast time and format. His programs, of course, filled standard slots of 15- to 90-minute duration; beyond that, however, they bear little resemblance to other comedy-variety shows, either before or since. Even the commercial breaks in the late Dutch Masters specials were created by Kovacs, and they stand on their own as among his best comic blackouts.

Many video artists, in reaction to broadcasting's characteristically neat, segmented packaging of anything and everything, have directly addressed the nature and meaning of TV time. Stated simply, video artists have felt that the expression of an idea should take just as long as it takes – with how long it takes of often being part of the idea. Thus the brief entertaining bits from Wegman are not entirely dissimilar from the very long, repetitive performances for camera by Bruce Naumann, John Baldessari, Howard Fried, Acconci and others; both a common irrelation to the time-clock formats of broadcast.

Kovacs must have felt the strain of time-fill during his early days on TV; his genial contempt is in clear evidence in a 1956 program in which he nonchalantly counts down, from 60 to one, an extra unscripted minute of airtime. But, it is also said, Kovacs' premiere on the CBS network came up a good deal shorter; his response was to strike the set and embark, for the benefit of the home audience, on an impromptu, behind the scenes tour of the TV soundstage.

While Kovacs could adopt a casual attitude toward precious minutes of commercial airtime, he was also the first video speedster. His visual blackouts, at times only a few seconds at length, represent an original, indigenous television form. Graphic one-liners with immediate impact, their brevity is largely a function of intimate staging; extended Chaplinesque balletics are, after all, inappropriate to videospace. Television producers and video artists would later adopt Kovacs' pace and the blackout format to their own ends.

According to Michael Shore in *The Rolling Stone Book of Rock Video*, "...the only person in those days (television's 'golden age') to stretch the bounds of TV visuals the way rock videos do today was the anarchic comic visionary Ernie Kovacs."⁷ Kovacs; works of "illustrated music" presage all the forms of contemporary music videos: The performance tape (and parodies thereof, especially if you take into account The Nairobi Trio); illustrated song lyrics (including a series of hilarious cartoon sketches to accompany a recording by the Dave Appel Trio on a 1952 installment of *Kovacs' Unlimited*); mini-narratives (a nourish street scene set to Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*); and rhythmic collages (the *1812 Overture* visualized with celery, eggs, the spinning head of a cow, mechanical monkeys, and an obese ballerina). "Jealousy," in which all the objects in a deserted office, from file drawers and water coolers to paper clips and pencil sharpener, come to life and keep time in true cartoon fashion, in Kovacs' masterpiece of illustrated music and, indisputably in a class by itself.

Although the cultural impact of visual music has largely come about as a result of rock promo overkill, the process of integrating electronic images and musical compositions has been central to video art from the beginning. After the aforementioned *Jazz Images* program, WGBH invited Nam June Paik to produce a four-hour live broadcast of synthesized video set to the music of The Beatles (*Video Commune*, 1970), and nine visual artists including Jackie Cassen, James Seawright, and Stan Vanderbeek to interpret symphonic works in collaboration with the Boston Symphony Orchestra (*Video Variations*, 1974). Paik had by this time become infamous for his video performances with avant-garde cellist Charlotte Moorman, in both *TV Bra For Living Sculpture* (1969) and *TV Cello* (1971). Moorman's music served to electronically transform in real-time, live and pretaped video imagery. More recently, artists such as Ernest Gusella and Vibeke Sorensen have created music and visuals as an integrated whole, while others, including Joan Logue and John Sanborn, have produced innovative promo tapes for pop performers (Paul Simon, King Crimson) and acted as visual collaborators with such experimental composers as Robert Ashley, Philip Glass, David Van Tieghem, and Jill Kroesen. Sanborn has also been especially articulate regarding the fusion of image and sound: of his own work, he demands that, like a good song, it withstand repeated play. This is partly a test of a music tape's marketability but, more importantly, it is a measure of video artistry.

If longevity is a criterion in the ultimate judgment of music videos, then Kovacs' work remains equal to any, and he is the form's peerless pioneer.

ERNIE KOVACS AND THE FUTURE

In 1972 Terry Galanoy wrote:

Although television performers and programs have not advanced in the past ten years, its technicians have. Today, videotape equipment is smaller, more precise and easier to operate. They've got new computerized gear to accomplish motion picture techniques such as cutting, dissolving, fading, superimposing and slow motion. It's just unfortunate that Ernie isn't around to show everyone how to use it.⁸

Ditto, in spades, in 1986. With the rise of digital effects and stereo TV, more liberal attitudes among broadcast programmers, the proliferation of cable, satellite dishes, home VCRs and disc units, and a growing acceptance of video art, the medium is a vastly different beast than it was in Kovacs' time. He could have helped to shape the future of TV and video ... and perhaps, with newfound interest in his work, he ultimately will.

But, sad to say, commercial TV will probably never again see such an impertinent outburst of creative genius as Ernie Kovacs. And, strangely believe it, neither may video art.

¹ Douglas Davis and Alison Simmons, eds., *The New Television: A Public/Private Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972), p. 280.

² Hollis Frampton, "The Withering Away of the State of the Art," *Circles of Confusion* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), pp. 161-170.

³ Jim Pomeroy, "Ruminations, Mythology, Pluralism and a Non-Linear Precursor," *New Music America Festival '81 Catalogue* (San Francisco: New Music Alliance/New Music America, 1981), p. 5.

⁴ This was The National Center for Experiments in Television, begun in 1967 at KQED, San Francisco's public television station. Brice Howard published several books (and many videotaped "notebooks") through the Center, most notably *Videospace* (1972).

⁵ Douglas Davis, *Art and the Future* (New York: Praeger, 1973), pp. 151-152.

⁶ From a conversation with the artist.

⁷ Michael Shore, *The Rolling Stone Book of Rock Video* (New York: Quill, 1984), p. 23.

⁸ Terry Galanoy, "Ode to a Bottomless Bathtub," *Playboy* (August 1972), p. 213.

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